

## **A COMMUNITY FOREST FARM**

On the slopes of a holy mountain, you can hear if you listen carefully the birth pangs of a new dream.

It's a dream about woodland pigs, mushroom growing and the whole gamut of forest farming. It's about community involvement in growing food for the Welsh town of Abergavenny and caring for a place of awe-inspiring beauty.

Of course we all enjoy the dreaming stage of projects, but let me tell you about steps I have already taken to make my forest farm dream a reality.

I live at Llwyn Ffranc on the western side of the Skirrid, revered locally as a holy mountain. I bought this small hill farm after decades as a globetrotting news correspondent and I moved very gradually into farming. I planted about 4000 trees, including an orchard with plums, cherries, apples, pears, apricots and an assortment of nut trees. I sought advice from an expert on how to create an orchard and I followed his instructions to put in a gate. "It's to let the cold air out," he said.

For years I avoided livestock except for a few chickens, but all that changed in the spring of 2008. A friend more versed in country ways than I came round as I was digging in the vegetable garden. We got talking about self-sufficiency and my friend suddenly said: "What about keeping some pigs?" I warmly agreed to the idea and we started to research what kind of pigs to buy. We discovered that nearby there was a pig co-operative - a group of people who took it in turns to feed their livestock.

We accompanied one co-op member on his feeding duties. Red gingery pigs looking very reminiscent of wild boar came roaring out of the undergrowth to get their dinner. We were instantly hooked by these handsome beasts. We tracked down a breeder selling Tamworths in Herefordshire and soon became the proud owners of four weaners, three male and one female. We were committed now but still green as grass in the ways of pigs, so the next step was to read the Soil Association booklet "Pig Ignorant". We set about finding sources of feed and plunged straight into our new venture as pig farmers. It has been a hugely engrossing succession of tasks and challenges, from the occasional foray for acorns under aged oaks to the job of enticing wandering Tamworths back into their enclosure.

The first journey to the abattoir with three five-month-old boars was emotional. How could it be otherwise? But I did feel a sense of pride and achievement. We had raised our own pigs and could feel part of a long and honourable tradition of peasants. The pork tasted sublime and the crackling was the best I have ever eaten.

In 2009 I tackled another dimension of forest farming – mushroom growing. The basic idea sounded simple enough. So I got some alder and oak logs from my own farm and elsewhere and bought some Shiitake mushroom

spawn from a U.S. company called Fungi Perfecti. The spawn arrived on inch-long birch plugs. The general plan seemed straightforward: drill a series of holes in the logs, hammer in the plugs and then wait a year or so for the mushrooms to fruit. Being a rank beginner, however, I made one major blunder. I bought 5000 plugs in all, including 3000 which arrived in just one bag. When I read the instructions, I discovered that once the bag was open I had to use all the plugs within 24 hours or so. Help!

I put together a small army of helpers. On the first Saturday in January, in freezing weather, five of us drilled holes in the logs, hammered in the mushroom spawn and then sealed the holes with molten beeswax. On Sunday three of us were at work again and by sunset we had actually hammered in all 3000 plugs. It was a busy two days. As soon as the logs had been inoculated, we ferried them by barrow into a heated garden shed. Newly injected mushroom spawn has no fondness for sub-zero temperatures and can perish.

A year later, we are still waiting to see whether the mushroom exercise was a success or a failure and our frozen fingers remain crossed.

So, thanks to the inspiration and hard work of some good friends we have the first stepping stones in place. But where does this tale of a forest farm lead next? I picture a forest farming enterprise and learning centre. I have lived at this farm for nine years now and for me it is the loveliest place on Earth. It's tucked in underneath the woodland that marches up the slopes of the Skirrid. From my office window I look out on the garden, then the woodland and finally the rocky crags of the holy mountain. I couldn't wish for a more inspiring view. And I feel it's time for me to share its beauty and its bounty with like-minded people.

So if you are intrigued by the idea of

- being part of a pioneering community food project
- having a chance to grow mushrooms
- being able to buy locally grown apples or plums
- being able to choose a Tamworth pig for your table while it is still alive
- joining a pig co-op

then this could be your chance to follow your own dream. Why not come to a meeting at Llwyn Ffranc farm on Saturday February 13. The meeting will start at 10am and finish by 4pm. We will be serving a hot soup for lunch. If you'd like to come, please contact Stephen Powell on email [stephen@gaiacoach.co.uk](mailto:stephen@gaiacoach.co.uk) or call 01873 890032.